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HK Bans Certain Japanese Food Items due to Detection of Radiation

Report Categories:

Agriculture in the News

Market Development Reports

Sanitary/Phytosanitary/Food Safety

Approved By:

Erich Kuss

Prepared By:

Caroline Yuen

Report Highlights:

Effective March 24, Hong Kong banned certain food products from five Japanese prefectures as a result of the detection of Iodine 131 in three produce samples. The banned products include milk, milk beverages, dried milk, vegetables, fruits, chilled or frozen game, meat and poultry, poultry eggs, and live, chilled or frozen aquatic products harvested or processed after March 11. However, chilled or frozen game, meat and poultry, poultry eggs, and live, chilled or frozen aquatic products will be excluded from the ban if they are certified by the competent authority of Japan that the radiation levels do not exceed the standards set by Codex. Processed food is not affected by the ban. This is the first time that Hong Kong exercised import prohibition measures since such authority was granted in May 2009. Meanwhile, the Hong Kong government emphasizes that Hong Kong's food supply is stable and has not been significantly affected.

Summary

The Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD) announced on March 23 that Hong Kong will prohibit, effective March 24, imports of Japanese food --- milk, milk beverages, dried milk, vegetables, fruits, chilled or frozen game, meat and poultry, poultry eggs, and live, chilled or frozen aquatic products --- harvested, manufactured, processed or packed on or after March 11 from five prefectures in Japan. The affected prefectures are Fukushima, Ibaraki, Tochigi, Gunma and Chiba. These foods are also prohibited to be supplied within Hong Kong after March 24. Chilled or frozen game, meat and poultry, poultry eggs, and live, chilled or frozen aquatic products will be excluded from the ban if they are certified by the competent authority of Japan that the radiation levels do not exceed the standards laid down by the Codex Alimentarius Commission in the Guideline Levels for Radionuclides in Foods Contaminated following a Nuclear or Radiological Emergency. These import and supply prohibition measures were taken in response to Hong Kong's detection of radioactive substances in three Japanese food samples.

The FEHD has not taken any action on other processed food imported from Japan, for example, biscuits, candies, cakes and frozen confections but pledged to strengthen surveillance at the import level by conducting tests for radiation levels.

Background

The FEHD has stepped up surveillance on fresh produce from Japan and conducted radiological testing since March 12 as a result of the radiation leak at the Fukushima nuclear plant. (See Report HK1108: Hong Kong Government's Ad hoc Surveillance Measures on Japanese Food). A total of 288 samples were taken so far and three samples of the latest 57 samples drawn were found with radioactive substances exceeding the level set by Codex.

A radioactive substance, Iodine-131, was detected in excessive levels in the three samples, including a radish sample at 260 bq/kg and a turnip sample at 800 bq/kg from one batch, and a spinach sample at 1000 bq/kg, from two consignments of imported Japanese food by the Hong Kong's Contamination Monitoring System and the Government Laboratory.

This is the first time that the Hong Kong government exercised its newly attained power to prohibit the importation of problem food. To address public health concerns, the Hong Kong government introduced an Amendment to the food law that empowers the Director of FEHD to prohibit the import and supply of problem food and order a recall of the problem food when the authority has reasonable grounds to believe that the making of the order is necessary to prevent or reduce a possibility of danger to the public's health. The amendment came into effect May 8, 2009.

Hong Kong Government Assuring Food Supply

The Hong Kong government (HKG) has assured Hong Kong consumers that there was abundant food supply in Hong Kong. There was no cause for alarm as different types of Japanese food constituted only a small portion of Hong Kong's total imports and the effect on the overall food supply in Hong Kong would be minimal. Meanwhile, the HKG met with the trade obtaining first hand information on Hong Kong's food supply and shared with the public the meeting discussions.

Reportedly, representatives of supermarket chains, frozen food wholesalers and other retailers at the meeting with the HKG said that the quantity of imports from the affected areas in Japan was small and the trade had been actively identifying new sources of supply, including other regions of Japan and other countries.

While the HKG emphasized that the small share of Japanese food in Hong Kong's overall food supplies, it was reported that one out of four babies in Hong Kong drink formula derived from Japanese infant powder.

Given the significant impact on infant powder, the HKG relayed the infant formula agents' message at the meeting that the Japanese infant formula currently available in the market was manufactured before the nuclear incident. The government also quoted trade representatives' assurance that supply of infant formula from other countries was abundant.

However, there existed a general view that various types of Japanese food might be in short supply in the near future because of Japanese priority of meeting domestic demand after the catastrophe. Also, the public has showed prudence in consuming Japanese food.

Testing Results

Table 1. Hong Kong: Testing of Japanese Food against Radiation

Food type tested	Samples Tested from March 22, 2 pm to March 23, 2 pm	Accumulative no. of consignment tested (March 12 to 23)
Vegetables	28	86
Fruits	0	12
Milk and milk beverage	0	0
Milk powder	2	10
Frozen confections	0	2
Aquatic products	22	145
Meat	0	12
Others (eg. cereal products, snacks)	5	21
Total no. of consignment tested	57 (3 unsatisfactory)	288 (3 unsatisfactory)

Source : Center for Food Safety

Table 2. Hong Kong: Details of the Three Unsatisfactory Samples

Type of Sample	Testing Item	Testing Result
White Radish	Iodine -131 Caesium – 134 Caesium – 137	260 Bq/kg Not detected Not detected
Turnip	Iodine -131 Caesium – 134 Caesium – 137	800 Bq/kg 25 Bq/kg 26Bq/kg
Spinach	Iodine -131 Caesium – 134 Caesium - 137	1000 Bq/kg 8.5 Bq/kg 19 Bq/kg

Source : Center for Food Safety